

UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

Volume 9
Number 1 *Forum Theme: The Digital Turn: A Roundtable*

Article 4

3-2014

Should We Be Content with Content?

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Recommended Citation

O'Loughlin, Jim (2014) "Should We Be Content with Content?," *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*. Vol. 9 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol9/iss1/4>

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Should We Be Content with Content?

Part of the journal section “Forum: The Digital Turn: A Roundtable”

Jim O’Loughlin, “Should We Be Content with Content?”

In the recent issue of *Harper’s*, publisher John R. MacArthur offers up a fairly apocalyptic account of the state of print magazines entitled “Can Magazines Be Saved?” For MacArthur, things started going wrong in the late 1990s when newspapers and magazines began taking writing that their subscribers paid for— now deemed “content”— and putting it online. As MacArthur writes, “Not only was ‘content’ an empty and offensive word, but my fellow publishers also proposed to give it away free in the quest for more advertising (8).” MacArthur is right to argue that what began as a shift in publishing has transformed into a crisis in journalism, in which the future of many venerable print institutions (and the jobs they provide) are in doubt. I should note that *Harper’s* has always kept its online magazine behind a paywall.

MacArthur himself begins his piece with a nostalgic look back to a time in the 1980s when he talked his way into meetings with CEOs of multinational corporations and successfully persuaded many to advertise in his magazine. What MacArthur doesn’t note, but what any reader of *Harper’s* can see, is that few if any of those advertisers grace the pages of the magazine today, though ads can be found for senior living facilities in Pennsylvania and for the Wow computer, which is promoted as “The Computer Designed for You, Not Your Grandchildren!”

My point here is that from MacArthur’s perspective, as the publisher of an important analog magazine, the problem is that there is little that can be done. He is hopeful that subscribers will continue to support the work of *Harper’s*, but the model for an advertiser-supported, national print magazine is broken. We should not expect *Newsweek* to be the last magazine to print its final issue. There is something disconcerting about such changes—I don’t want to minimize that—and I worry about other changes to come if, for example, brick and mortar bookstores find it increasingly difficult to compete against Amazon and other electronic booksellers.

But at the same time, I think we would make a mistake if we allowed the view from an institution like *Harper’s* to define our understanding of the Digital Turn. I’m using this phrase—Digital Turn—to refer to this moment in history when the Internet is fast becoming, or has become, the dominant cultural medium. The distinct capabilities of that medium—instant access to texts and the ability to collaborate and respond quickly and easily—have come to define common expectations for all cultural forms (be they social networking sites or print poetry chapbooks). And in this moment of the Digital Turn, what is striking to me (contra MacArthur) is how *much there is* that can be done.

As my own work has increasingly moved in a digital direction, my perspective has departed sharply from MacArthur's (though I still gladly renew my subscription to *Harper's* every year and encourage you to do the same). Where I feel MacArthur gets things wrong is in his assumption that writers will simply be forced to transition into becoming content providers and will therefore suffer a decline in stature.

Instead, I think what is increasingly likely is that writers will come to think of providing content as only a part of what they do. As Jerome McGann has written, it is likely that those individuals whose work "will matter most are people who will be at least as involved with *making* things as with writing text" (19). I saw this insight illustrated during Kate Pullinger's [recent talk](#) as part of the Digital Turn series. She is someone who has found success as both a print and digital novelist. And in her digital work, she is not simply a content provider but a collaborator who understands enough about the technology that she can make helpful contributions to the final product, even if she herself is not doing the coding and design that is necessary to create digital works like *Inanimate Alice* and [Flight Paths](#).

We are increasingly *unlikely* to find writers who *only* provide content when the tools for photography, videography and digital design can all be found on our laptops or even on our phones. It is not simply that writers will need to do more. Writers will want to do more, because with a modest amount of effort they can be their own designers, photographers, publishers or even programmers.

So, let me conclude with a shameless plug for [the lecture series](#). In the spring of 2014, the Department of Languages & Literatures will be bringing in three speakers who have embraced the possibilities of digital culture: the rhetoric scholar Cheryl Ball; coordinator of the CulturePlex digital humanities website, Juan Luis Suarez; and cultural critic (as well as upcoming host of his own series on PBS) Steven Johnson. These writers have not only made the Digital Turn, they are helping to chart the direction in which we are headed. Like them, I think none of us in this room need to be content with just providing content, but only if we are willing to think seriously not only about our ideas but about what tools we can use to bring our ideas to an audience.

References

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